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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRAGUE 000072

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STATE FOR EUR/NCE ALEX TRATENSEK, DS/T/ATA AND DS/IP/EUR

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [OSCE](#) [ASEC](#) [EZ](#)

SUBJECT: REFORMS AND POLITICAL INTERFERENCE PUT PRESSURE ON
CZECH POLICE

REF: PRAGUE 01153

Classified By: POLEC Counselor Michael Dodman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The United States has enjoyed excellent cooperation with Czech legal authorities, as demonstrated, for example, by last year's extradition of terror suspect Oussama Kassir to stand trial in the United States. However, mass resignations of experienced police officers in response to new retirement rules and alleged political interference could cause at least a temporary set-back in the country's efforts to build up and clean up its police system. While these developments should not have a significant impact on our day-to-day law enforcement and counter-terrorism cooperation with the Czech Republic, they represent a potential weakness in the Czech police structures and staffing that post has sought to address through training, including courses focused on transparency and anti-corruption. END SUMMARY.

POLICE REFORM?

12. (C) The United States has had very strong, if not always seamless, cooperation with the GOCR on law enforcement, intelligence, and counter-terrorism. The 2006 arrest, and 2007 extradition, of terrorism suspect Oussama Kassir was perhaps the best public example of this cooperation. While we have long had concerns about corruption and politicization in the Czech law enforcement sphere, cooperation has been consistent and productive. However, several trends underway in recent months call for some level of increased USG focus on the underpinnings of our bilateral cooperation.

13. (U) In October 2007, the head of the Czech Organized Crime Police Unit (UOOZ), Jan Kubice, tendered his resignation. Following Kubice's resignation, several dozen senior UOOZ investigators also resigned. The head of the country's Public Corruption unit (UOKFK), Renata Strnadova, followed suit, citing a lack of support from the Ministry of Interior (MOI) leadership to achieve her unit's goals. In all, 111 positions in UOOZ were left vacant by the resignations, and the Corruption Unit lost 77 officers. The National Drug Headquarters also lost experienced officers in what became a wave of resignations at the end of 2007. Post's Regional Security Officer (RSO) reported that his contacts in local police forces were also facing staffing shortages in their rank and file.

14. (SBU) Law enforcement officers have told the Embassy that the losses constitute a serious blow to their investigatory efforts and will likely hinder law enforcement agencies' ability to apprehend and prosecute criminals for years to come. By the end of 2007, some 5000 positions, or approximately 10% of the total general police force, remained

unfilled. These deficits have been attributed in part to inadequate pay and benefits packages, as well as better opportunities in the private sector. However, some observers have discounted this gap by noting that the Czech Republic has far more police officers per capita than most European countries. Moreover, the country's entry into the Schengen zone may free up hundreds of former border guards to fill some of these openings.

15. (U) The "Law on Public Service," which became effective January 1, 2008, may partially explain these departures. According to the law, retirement packages will only be offered to those officers with more than 15 years of service (compared to 10 years under the former system). Additionally, heads of police agencies will be required to possess university degrees and speak a foreign language. These new requirements effectively disqualify many of the most experienced and motivated police officers from continued service.

16. (C) The law has its supporters. Adriana Krnacova, the former director of the Czech branch of Transparency International, believes the Public Service Law is necessary to reform the police. Without it, she says, young and educated professional officers would stand very little chance of promotion. Similarly, Vojtech Cepl, a professor of law and the principal drafter of the 1993 Czech Constitution, believes the law could serve as a model for other reforms, especially in the judiciary where he finds it ludicrous that "communist-era judges are deciding complex commercial litigation cases worth millions of dollars" when they lack the necessary education and experience.

OR A POWER GRAB?

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17. (C) However, some of the police officers who resigned cite insecurity and low morale within the police as the real reasons for their departure. In private conversations with embassy officers, they allege that political leaders have attempted to influence many investigations for political reasons. Some officers go so far as to say that Minister of Interior, Ivan Langer, is using the police restructuring as a maneuver to gain control over the police so that he can continue to influence criminal investigations that could negatively impact the ruling Civic Democrats (ODS). They also allege that Langer exercises his control over the police through the three deputy chiefs of police, whom he had very carefully hand-picked. Critics also cite Langer's decision to dissolve the country's well-regarded Financial Police Unit as further proof that Langer's reforms are little more than political machinations and a power grab.

18. (U) Most notable among Langer's critics is former Czech President Vaclav Havel. In an interview with the Czech Press Office (CTK), published on November 2, Havel underscored the current problems at MOI and Langer's responsibility: "(W)hen the whole leadership of the squad for uncovering organized crime, with 50 of its best criminologists and their spokeswoman (leave), followed by the leadership of the Corruption Service the next day, I think that the Interior Minister and the Police President should be held responsible."

COMMENT

19. (C) Politicization and public sector corruption are nothing new in the Czech Republic. The government of PM Topolánek came into office a year ago, promising sweeping reforms in many different areas. Few would argue that the police which, with the exception of the specialized units, is generally viewed as corrupt and unresponsive, would not benefit from changes and reforms. However, the Ministry of

Interior's steps in its first year do not inspire much confidence that the direction it has charted is the right one. Indeed, the mass departures of experienced police officers may exacerbate the situation, since junior and less experienced officers may find it difficult to maintain their independence in politically charged investigations (although, to be fair, the new Public Service Law that is behind much of the police resignations was passed by the previous government). In addition to the widely publicized departures, the most visible aspect of the police reform has been a rebranding exercise with the motto "chranit a pomahat" (to protect and assist), which will likely have little -- if any -- impact on the problems faced by the police.

¶10. (C) We do not expect the problems described here will have any immediate impact on our cooperation with the Czechs, which to date has been very strong and productive. While critics of Interior Minister Langer abound, he has demonstrated that in priority areas, for example the Czech Republic's entry into the Schengen zone, he can deliver excellent results. However, in particular because of the large turnover of staff in key police branches, and the vacancies already present, USG agencies need to be aware that it may not be business as usual with Czech counterparts. We may face delays in cooperation. We will likely face more relatively inexperienced interlocutors; we could see increased political bias. It is too soon to tell how significant these impacts will be, how long the transition will last, and what the long-term holds in terms of law enforcement effectiveness and bilateral cooperation. But certainly these developments highlight the need for continued USG ethics and rule of law training for the police. Our training programs have always been well received and remain much sought after. In the absence of leadership from the top, it is even more critical to give those at lower levels of authority the tools necessary to transform the law enforcement system over time from the bottom up. END COMMENT.
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